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ABSTRACT

This digest examines considerations and strategies for selecting and retaining teacher mentors, suggesting that the degree to which mentors are meaningfully engaged in the mentoring process may have a significant impact on a program's success. Strategies for recruiting mentors range from opportunistic appointment to promoting self-nomination to tying mentorship status to a developmental career ladder. Various programs identify selection strategies based on their vision of the purposes of mentoring and factors they most wish to promote. One of the most influential criteria for mentor selection is their reputation as effective classroom teachers. There is little documentation of strategies utilized to retain mentors. Some appropriate strategies include recognizing mentor expertise and acknowledging and compensating mentors' contribution to the professional development of new teachers. It is important to appropriately match mentors to proteges. This matching can impact retention of both teachers and mentors. Ongoing support and training designed specifically for mentors often serves as an important mechanism for retaining mentors. Mentor compensation can include stipends paid directly to mentors; release time; allocations of funds to schools and districts to support associated implementation costs; additional classroom assistance and support; and financial support for and priority access to professional development. (Contains 22 references.) (SM)

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ERIC Digest

By

Bonnie B. Mullinix

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DIGEST

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Selecting and Retaining Teacher Mentors

Bonnie B. Mullinix

The last decade has produced a great deal of literature and research documenting the importance of teacher mentors in teacher training and retention programs. This digest offers some collected wisdom regarding considerations and strategies for selecting and retaining teacher mentors. Related sub-issues of recruitment and compensation are also addressed. While presented in a sequential pattern, selection and retention of mentors are, in reality, integrated features of an on-going and spiraling process. Mentors continually cycle into and out of teacher education, induction and retention programs. The degree to which these critical participants are meaningfully engaged in the mentoring process may have a significant impact on a program's success.

Recruiting and Selecting Mentors

Strategies for recruiting mentors appear to range from opportunistic appointment to promoting self-nomination to tying mentorship status to a developmental career ladder. These strategies, buoyed primarily by support, incentives, and compensation mechanisms, are a less prominently reported thread in the literature than the selection criteria and desired characteristics for mentor participation in programs; there are fewer documented articulations of recruitment strategies to draw from than there are selection strategies.

Various programs identify selection criteria based on their vision of the purposes of mentoring and the factors they most wish to promote. Feiman-Nemser and Parker (1992) identified such purposes and associated expectations as including: labor market improvement strategies (for improving trainees classroom performance and strengthening commitment to remain in teaching); an institutionalized buddy system (to provide emotional and material support to decrease isolation of new teachers); on-the-job training (to introduce curriculum materials, management systems, program goals, and school culture); collegiality (to encourage reflective practice, action research and participation in collaborative learning communities); or clinical teacher education (that focuses on student learning, pedagogical reasoning in connecting practical clustering based issues to larger social political and moral questions) (p 20-21).

Consideration of special needs and contexts can also influence the approach to recruiting and selecting mentors. Programs supporting bilingual teachers in the southwest for example, will have different needs, foci and characteristics for its mentors than those trying to recruit and retain teachers in the rural Midwest or urban subcultural settings across the country. Nationwide, programs supporting teacher induction in such wide-ranging areas as early childhood education (Breunig & Bellm, 1996), special education (Reid, 1994), integration of technology and assessment (Nichols & Singer, 2000) report on how their strategic use of mentors enhances their programs.

One of the most influential criterions for selection of mentors is their reputation as effective classroom teachers. Some additional common characteristics of and criteria for selecting mentor teachers are: a clearly articulated vision of teaching and learning, knowledge of content, accomplished curriculum developer, professional interests, expressed educational philosophies, and compatible personalities (1986; Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Tillman, 2000). Awareness and facility with mentoring processes are seldom among selection criteria, but are often handled through mentor training mechanisms.

Orientation of mentors and their inclusion in the participatory design and modification of mentoring programs can serve as its own recruitment and selection mechanism. Mauer and Zimmerman (1996) describe how self-selection of mentors coupled with solid training and an embedded understanding of Ellen Moir's five phases characterizing first-year teacher experiences (anticipation, survival, disillusionment, rejuvenation, reflection) helped veteran teachers and administrators recognize areas that needed to be addressed in the mentoring process and contributed to the overall success of the program (Mauer & Zimmerman, 2000).

Retaining and Compensating Mentors

In general, retaining quality teachers within school systems remains the core concern. In this light, mentoring is perhaps most appropriately perceived as a way to engage, challenge and retain effective teachers. As practicing teachers, mentors appreciate and value the opportunities to interact, share their expertise and develop as they support new teachers (Tillman, 2000). Mentoring can offer teachers the opportunity to shine and share where they might otherwise hesitate or hide. Innovators isolated in their classrooms who may appear threatening to their peers, are transformed into inspirational role models for new teachers and feel appreciated and are renewed through the process of mentoring. By the same token, when not strategically selected, mentors can serve to perpetuate stagnant educational approaches, undermined teacher education, and stifle reform efforts (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). So just as good mentors should be retained, it is important to evaluate mentor effectiveness and establish clear and objective criteria for differentially encouraging or discouraging continued participation of mentors.

Once a mentor has been recruited and identified as effective, however, experts agree the mentor should be retained. Even so, there is currently little documentation of strategies utilized to retain mentors. A Mentor Teacher program in Los Angeles designed to retain capable teachers by expanding their rewards and opportunities, conceptualized mentors as educational companions and worked to maximize opportunities for professionally rewarding interactions with colleagues (Feiman-Nemser, 1992). Recognizing the expertise of mentors and acknowledging and compensating their contribution to professional development of new teachers can go a long way toward ensuring their retention. If appropriately valued and integrated into administrative and program structures, mentor retention and advancement can be a natural byproduct of a teacher mentoring program (Purdue, 1986).

In the last half-decade a significant amount of research has been focused on the benefits experienced teachers receive from serving as mentors. Best categorized as professional development, these benefits fall into seven categories: improved professional competency; reflective practice; professional renewal; psychological benefits (enhanced self-esteem); collaboration and collegiality; contributions to teacher leadership; and pedagogical inquiry/teacher research (Huling & Resta, 2001). These appear to be the key reasons mentors continue to serve in this capacity.

The issue of appropriately matching mentors to protégés is one that often receives attention as it also can impact retention of both teacher and teacher mentor. This is not surprising given that mentors can provide the emotional and professional support that often influences teachers' decisions to remain in the profession. With teachers of color decreasing in number and leaving the profession early (Lewis, 1996), maximizing support for this cohort involves integrating strategies for multicultural mentoring (Rodriguez & Sjostrom, 2000). While there remains disagreement over the advantages and disadvantages of matching characteristics in mentoring relationships, it has been noted that the personal relationship at the heart of mentoring can be problematic when mentor

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and protégé are of different genders, races, or ethnic backgrounds (Kerka, 1998). Where few veteran teachers of color exist, program developers are advised to consider creating optimal conditions for mentoring rather than trying to promote optimal matches (Tauer, 1996). Implementing programmatic structures to ensure that mentoring facilitates professional empowerment and promotes diversity may be a vital key to a successful program.

On-going training and support designed specifically for mentors often serves as an important mechanism for retaining mentors. Practical scenarios and strategies shared in a timely manner can work to increase mentor effectiveness and help to differentiate between the various roles and responsibilities of mentors. Requirements for mentors operating within various programs often differ, but generally the distinction between evaluation, supervision and mentoring are important considerations to understand and address in training programs. Training that provides experiential orientation to techniques of observation, consultation, coaching and theories of adult learning help acquaint mentors with their new roles (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). Periodic workshops addressing leadership styles, time management and balancing teaching and mentoring responsibilities as well as sessions that share current research applications can help support mentor development. Ongoing dialogue groups for mentors also serve as excellent support mechanisms for collaborative reflection and shared learning regarding the mentoring process.

While many of the retention strategies highlighted above certainly provide compensatory support to mentors, compensation is traditionally viewed as financial in nature. Recognition of the need to restructure compensation programs to reward teacher knowledge and skill was directly addressed in "What Matters Most: Improving Teaching and Learning", the 1996 report of the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future (NCTAF), as it recommended reallocating $10 billion towards such ends (1996). Mentors represent a vital component of this latent potential for educational renewal and reform. The February 2001 State Higher Education Executive Officers' research-based report on teacher recruitment, continues this thread, adding that compensation of teacher mentors should extend to enabling in-class support of novice teachers in their initial years of teaching (Hirsch, 2001). Innovative programs in various states continue to experiment with the most effective combination of incentive and compensation strategies to complement the inherent benefits of mentoring and appropriately acknowledge the contributions and efforts of mentors (Ballinger, 2000; Carr & Dunne, 1991; Smith, 2000). These authors and others note that compensation of mentors generally takes the following forms:

- Stipends paid directly to mentors;
- Time – release time for mentoring, observation, in-class support, joint planning and teaching; additional compensatory personal time;
- Allocations of funds to schools and districts to support associated implementation costs such as mentor release time, substitutes and travel between schools or even percentages of augmented mentor salaries;
- Additional classroom assistance and support for teaching and non-teaching responsibilities;
- Financial support and priority access to professional development in the form of university courses, training workshops and conferences.

Other non-financial and unplanned outcome compensation cited by the researchers above include increased involvement in decision-making, increased status and respect and, longer-term, recruitment into administrative and supervisory positions. Creative options for additional compensation as well as more careful evaluation of current strategies are worthy of future exploration.

Mentors may well provide the turnkey to educational renewal and reform. If so, the attention paid to appropriately structuring programs that support their strategic recruitment, thoughtful retention, and appropriate compensation will represent time well spent.

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